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Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1914

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Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890–1914, by Jørn Brøndal. Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2004. xi, 379 pp. Tables, maps, appendixes, notes, index. $44.95 cloth.

Reviewer Knut Oyangen is a doctoral student in agricultural history and rural studies at Iowa State University, where he is working on a dissertation on ethnic identity among immigrants in the Midwest.

Jørn Brøndal, a history professor at the University of Southern Denmark, has condensed his dissertation into a book on ethnic leadership among Scandinavian Americans during Wisconsin's celebrated Progressive Era. A systematic exposition of arguments without stylistic exuberance betrays the work's origins in doctoral research, but the book is thorough, well organized, and founded on extensive archival research and readings in the secondary literature. It does, however, have some important, non-stylistic flaws.

The narrative construction of Brøndal's treatment of Scandinavian involvement in Wisconsin politics is based on a distinction between the static "structure" of ethnic institutions and traditional ethnocultural politics, on the one hand, and the "dynamics" of the La Follette-led Progressive movement and its assault on the political status quo, on the other. Brøndal's description of the "structures" takes up the greater part of the book, in which he discusses, in turn, the role of pastors and the church, associational life, the press, and the early entry of Scandinavians into local and state politics. Much of this will be familiar to students of Scandinavian America or even to students of immigrant history in general. It might be of greater value to nonspecialists, as a basic introduction to ethnic institutions in the Midwest. Perhaps the most original aspect of this part of the work is Brøndal's attempt to deemphasize the role of religion, both in the formation of political attitudes and in the development of party loyalties. Brøndal is correct in underscoring, in this regard, the important role of "national" identity and its manipulation by self-proclaimed ethnic leaders. Nevertheless, understanding the differences in religious mentalities exhibited by different immigrant groups remains imperative in any analysis of ethnic differences in social and political outlook in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Midwest. Furthermore, it is hazardous to proclaim that distinctions we might think of as symbolic were, by necessity, simply empty, meaningless, and artificial. Rather, the historian should acknowledge that symbolic thinking is inherent in human nature.

In general, Brøndal seems to have adopted the slightly overbearing notion (common among American historians) that Gilded Age voters were obsessed with ethnic identity, the tariff, and the gold

standard, when there were much more important issues on which they "should" have focused. Fortunately, the Progressives appeared in the 1890s to rescue Americans from their stubbornly parochial concerns. Thus Brøndal concludes that the Progressive movement "represented nothing less than a benign attempt to de-ethnicize politics, to rechannel political argument along a more meaningful course by confronting tangible social problems and real economic issues, rather than to deal in empty labels" (245).

In my opinion, the "benign" character of this effort is debatable. Before the 1890s, many midwestern states granted voting rights to immigrants who had declared their intention to become citizens. By the 1920s, all such rights had been taken away. Literacy, registration, and residency requirements were also used in northern states to exclude and disenfranchise immigrant voters, just as they were more famously used (often by Progressives) in the South to exclude blacks and poor whites. Progressivism had an antimajoritarian strain, and its assault on partisan politics often served, contrary to its stated purposes, to weaken democratic accountability.

Brøndal argues that a matrix of "party, nationality, locality, and personality" was central to leadership and leadership selection in pre-Progressive politics. Although that contention is well supported and relatively uncontroversial, the corresponding claim that Progressivism introduced a new mindset emphasizing principles, issues, and merit is dubious. Brøndal concedes that ethnic identity could still trump such considerations, as in the 1906 Republican gubernatorial primary when Norwegian James Davidson defeated the supposedly more progressive Swede, Irvine Lenroot. However, Progressive tactics in midwestern electoral politics also deviated sharply from the idealized vision described in this book. First of all, the term *Progressive* was used in vague and contradictory ways, often without reference to specific principles or issues other than the hopelessly vague idea of standing "for the people against the interests." Moreover, Progressives writing in Scandinavian-run newspapers typically attacked their more conservative opponents for being (a) inadequately progressive, in the sense just explained, (b) drunks and/or tools of the breweries and saloons, or (c) more generally, corrupt tools of corporations, trusts, and political bosses. Because accusations of drunkenness and corruption were common on the conservative side as well, the actual difference in argumentative style was smaller than Brøndal suggests. Furthermore, the weakening of party organizations effected by Progressive reforms tended to make elections more rather than less candidate-oriented.

Brøndal makes an impressively documented but ultimately inconclusive effort to assess the relationship between Progressivism and Scandinavian American identity. The fundamental flaw in this endeavor is his refusal to consider the electoral behavior of regular Scandinavians in any detail, especially outside the Wisconsin context. An analysis of other elections in the Midwest in 1906, for example, would have shown that, in Iowa, Scandinavians almost unanimously supported the Progressive agenda of Albert Cummins and were much less likely to bolt the party temporarily than more conservative native-stock Republicans were. It also would have shown that in Minnesota, large numbers of "insurgent" Scandinavians defected from the GOP to vote for Democrat John Johnson, an archetypal "man of the people," and that in North Dakota, Norwegians mobilized around an Irish Catholic Democrat, John Burke, to defeat Republican "boss" Alexander McKenzie and the allegedly drunk and incompetent governor, Elmore Sarles. In each case, Scandinavian identity was tightly linked to Progressivism and Republican insurgency. In fact, it might be argued that much of the peculiar strength of Progressivism in the upper Midwest derived from the Scandinavian element. The partial failure of Brøndal's book lies in his missing that crucial point, as well as in an unduly one-sided assessment of Progressivism and its effects on politics and society as a whole. Nonetheless, *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics* is a solid work that complements and in some ways surpasses previous work on this topic.

The Pilgrim Colony: The History of Saint Sebald Congregation, the Two Wartburgs, and the Synods of Iowa and Missouri, by Albert Llewellyn Hock. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004. 304 pp. Illustrations, map, appendixes, bibliography, notes. $16.00 paper.

Reviewer James S. Hamre is emeritus professor of religion and philosophy at Waldorf College. He is the author of *Waldorf College: Continuity and Change (1903–2003)* (2003).

The Pilgrim Colony traces religious, educational, and structural developments within one stream of German Lutheran immigrants to America during the last half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries. Inspired by the efforts of J. K. Wilhelm Loehe, an influential nineteenth-century clergyman in Neuendettelsau, Germany, four German Lutheran colonies were established in Michigan. An educational institution named Wartburg, intended initially to train parochial schoolteachers, was developed among them. Some of the colonists were drawn to the Missouri Synod, but a doctrinal disagreement